Understanding by Design

*Chapter 1*

I was not very familiar with the concept of Understanding by Design, so I learned a lot about it from the first chapter. Listing off the four “who, where, what, how” elements of teaching was a really good way to put in simple terms what the important parts of teaching are. It was interesting to learn about how the two ways of thinking are both dependant on and strengthened by each other; that interchangability is essential to teaching as a whole, and it was really valuable to learn about how those two major concepts come together to create an ideal framework for instruction. I really liked the part where the authors specified that differentiated instruction is not a formula or magic solution where you simply plug your students and content area into place and everything works well. I think it can be easy to want to use educational methods in this way, but as the authors stated, differentiated instruction is meant to guide teachers through their own methods of instruction and give them a foundation for how they should seek to educated fairly and effectively. Understanding by Design and differentiated instruction are both things that will definitely impact my future classroom. A ‘one size fits all’ method of instruction has no place in modern teaching, and it is essential that, when I am a teacher, I find ways to embrace my students’ differences and adapt my instruction to best fit their varied needs. I also think that the idea of formulating a curriculum around the needs of my students is very important to ensuring that they are successful, and I will definitely keep in mind the ways that appreciating the differences in their learning levels and styles can have a positive impact on our classroom.

*Chapter 2*

The accounts of the four students who faced difficulties in the classroom were really eye-opening for me. It was inspiring to read about the ways in which their teachers were able to successfully adapt their curriculum structure or instruction methods to suit the needs of their student. It really is sad when a student’s ability to learn is compromised by the rigid structures imposed by the traditional classroom setting, and I think the job of a teacher is to find ways to draw out that ability when something is blocking it. Elise’s story in particular made an impact on me because I know what it feels like to have family problems affect your schoolwork. Knowing how that experience feels is something I will definitely take into the classroom with me. I learned a lot from the section on responsive teaching, too. Everything the authors said about teachers developing relationships with their students goes along with how I plan to operate when I’m a teacher. I think one of the most valuable things a teacher can do for a student’s education is to allow them to walk into the classroom every day knowing that their teacher cares about them and is willing to do what needs to be done in order to help them succeed. Something else that really stuck out to me was the quote, “learning happens within students, not to them” (22). Teaching and learning are active processes with both parties being involved at the same level, as opposed to the teacher simply handing over knowledge to their students. This quote also reminds us that students are always active participants in their education, and as such they deserve to be taken into account when it comes to planning instruction, which goes back to responsive teaching.

*Chapter 3*

Having only learned a basic overview of backward design in Chapter 9, reading a whole chapter about it was very informative. I learned a lot about the very intricate specifics that go into planning a lesson, and I think backward design is something that would be very useful in my future classroom, because it puts the focus on what the student needs to learn instead of what the teacher wants to get accomplished. Hearing about the problems that teachers encounter when they are trying to cover all of the required content was a little daunting. I know that as a student, I have a tendency to get too in depth with a certain topic and miss out on other important topics because my mind is so focused on what interests me. Now that I know that I will likely have trouble fitting everything I need to teach into the curriculum as it is, I will have to be aware of my tendency to skip some things in favor of others and adjust my curriculum planning accordingly. I liked the part of the chapter where the author said that backward design allows for different methods of assessment to be used to measure the same results. This takes into account the varied learning styles of students and prevents students from doing poorly on assessments just because they are not particularly strong in a certain intelligence. This is something I definitely want to bring into my classroom someday; I want my students to be assessed fairly, and I want to find ways to measure success that are based on a student’s strengths, not their weaknesses.

*Chapter 4*

I really liked the part of the chapter where the authors reminded us that we are teaching people, not just empty heads waiting for content. I think teachers sometimes forget to think of their pupils as kids instead of just students; we need to remember that they have problems, goals, and challenges just like we do, and all of those things affect their education. The curriculum should serve the students, not the other way around. Knowing myself like I do, I think I could end up having the tendency to focus a little bit more on the instruction portion of teaching, because I really want to connect with my students and make their classroom a safe, happy environment. But now that I know that there must be a perfect balance between the two, I can prepare myself to make the content the foundation of my safe and happy classroom. I also think that what the chapter says about embracing the different learning styles and levels of students is definitely something that I want to make a part of my classroom. In order to effectively teach our students, we need to stop thinking of their differences as something to be bothered by. Even students who have some form of disability are not lacking as learners; they simply bring a different kind of intelligence into the classroom, and instead of bemoaning the difficulties that this can sometimes bring to teachers, we should be celebrating the way we and our students can learn from each other’s differences.

*Chapter 5*

I didn’t realize that assessment was such a layered, involved process, but I think it is extremely important to tailor assessment to our students’ individual needs the same way we do with instruction. It makes sense that the only way to get a full picture of their achievement is through several different methods, and this is a model I will take into the classroom with me in the future. The three different types of educational goals listed on page 64 were very helpful in explaining the way that different types of assessments should be specifically related to the kind of learning they are measuring. Assessment really isn’t a one size fits all component of teaching (not that any of them really are), so it was useful to see how we can put things into categories and organize them effectively. I really liked the ‘tic-tac-toe’ chart and method of allowing students to choose how they want their achievement to be measured. I always enjoyed it when teachers did this when I was in high school, and it is practice that I would like to implement in my future classroom too. I think it really gives students a chance to showcase their talents and makes something as stressful as assessment a little bit more easygoing. Even though tests and grades are essential to learning and should be handled as such, sometimes too much focus on numbers and rankings can detract from the actual knowledge and experience of creating a project or assignment for a class. Giving students more room for freedom and personal preferences in project-based assessment can allow them to get more out of the material itself, instead of forcing them to focus solely on what their grade will be.